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ABSTRACT

In 1975, J. A. Daly and M. D. Miller devised and validated a 26-item questionnaire to better understand why having to write produces an extreme level of anxiety for some people. This questionnaire has been used extensively in related research since its introduction. Subsequent studies, which have shown writing apprehension to be ubiquitous--cutting across every strata and segment of society--have determined: (1) student awareness of appropriate writing behavior is a good predictor of the quality of writing that will result; (2) there is a significant correlation between writing apprehension and course grades; (3) apprehensive writers not only avoid writing but also avoid writing instruction; (4) the inhibiting effects of writing apprehension can be a critical factor influencing academic and career decisions; and (5) writing apprehension can have a crippling effect on self-image and personal productivity. Studies which have sought to determine the causes of writing apprehension have found fear of exposure and possible embarrassment, the paralyzing effect of the perceived need to be perfect, and inadequate practice to be debilitating factors. Other studies have found that a concentrated focus on specific situations, audiences, and purposes may have value in overcoming student writing apprehension. (Contains 45 references.) (NH)

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New Directions in Research on Writing Apprehension

by S. M. (Steve) Walsh

"I can't write today because I lost my pencil.
I can't write today because I wrote yesterday.
I can't write today because my chair squeaks.
I can't write today because I can't think of anything to say.
I can't write today because I don't feel like it.
I can't write today because it's almost time for lunch.
I can't write today because I'd rather draw.
I can't write today because I ripped my paper.
I can't write today because I can't spell.
I can't write today because I hate writing.
I can't write today because I have to go to the bathroom.
I can't write today because there's no more room on my paper."

(from: "Ode to the reluctant writer" by Robin Staudt in Bonge, Gorchels, Staudt, and Welch, 1980)

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For most human beings, writing--especially writing under pressure--is not easy (Lane, 1983). Yet some people seem to find writing even more difficult than others. For them the hesitancies are more than the customary pauses that are needed to reflect while organizing ideas, and developing appropriate expressions of those ideas. For them the prospect of having to write produces a level of anxiety that is extreme (Rose, 1985).

In an attempt to better understand this anxiety, Daly and Miller (1975) devised and validated a 26-item questionnaire that has been used extensively in related research since its introduction. Subsequent studies have shown writing apprehension to be ubiquitous--cutting across every strata and segment of society.

For example, in a separate study conducted four years after the development of the questionnaire, Daly tested 3,602 students with the same instrument and found that low apprehensives--those who feel less stress--not only write differently but also produce better quality in their composition than do students who feel higher levels of apprehension. Petrosko, Kaiser, and Dietrich (1985) confirmed Daly's findings and also determined that the extent of student awareness of appropriate writing behavior is a good predictor of the quality of the composition that will result.

In 1978, Seiler, Garrison, and Bookar found a significant correlation between writing apprehension and course grades. In an article published in the Journal of Negro Education (1984), Bertie Powell documented similar conclusions.

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Silverman and Zimmerman (1982) revised and adapted the Daly and Miller instrument to specifically measure the writing anxiety of elementary school children. In separate studies Thompson (1983), and Gillam-Scott (1984) found similar but less pronounced anxieties among older students and adults.

Using a different set of standards, Faigley, Witte, and Daly (1981) substantiated Daly's earlier findings and went so far as to conjecture that apprehensive writers not only avoid writing situations but also avoid instruction in writing, thereby further limiting their ability to develop properly. Their research is also consistent with the findings of Kelly (1975) who indicated that apprehensive writers tend to hear "The Voice of Authority" and feel intimidated by "The Superior Intellect" when they try to write. Pearl Aldrich (1982) came to similar conclusions in studying the work habits of business professionals whose positions require writing but who dislike and endeavor to avoid it.

The inhibiting effects of writing apprehension are clear throughout the literature. Those who feel greater apprehension not only tend to be less capable writers but they also seem to be less aware of subtleties of language and of the ways in which those subtleties can be used to help them improve their communication skills. This can be a critical factor influencing both the academic and career decisions of many (Daly and Shamo, 1978).

However, there are exceptions to the prevailing rule. Powers, Cook, and Meyers (1979) have found that some students with low levels of apprehension are poor writers. And Lynn Bloom (1980) has noted high levels of apprehension among a number of very skilled writers. Although these findings are inconsistent with much of the related professional literature it is possible that sensitive aspects of ego development may be involved as far as these individuals are concerned--complex psychological processes of maturation that may or may not parallel the development of writing skills. Koch and Brazil (1978) refer to highly apprehensive writers as insecure. The terminology is consistent with the experimental research reported by B. W. Meers (1983) who indicates that learning to overcome writing apprehension can have therapeutic value--resulting in constructive ego development. Further research is clearly necessary in this area as there is still much that remains unknown about the causes and ramifications of writing apprehension and about the ways that it can affect specific individuals.

What is clear is that the problems of those who experience high levels of writing apprehension are numerous. Anne Auten (1983) indicates that the difficulties of apprehensive writers extend from the crafting of smooth and effective introductions to problems of thematic organization, theme development, coherence, diction, syntax, tense, mood, and redundancy. Daly (1977) has found that highly apprehensive writers use fewer adverbs and adjectives of certain kinds and are less capable in their use of punctuation. Virginia Book (1976) has found that the highly apprehensive write longer sentences but that their number of paragraphs are fewer and the average length of their compositions is

much shorter than those produced by less apprehensive writers. Aldrich (1982) has suggested that the highly apprehensive may write under-developed themes with more involved sentences in attempting to deliberaely camouflage their lack of in-depth understanding of a subject. The desire of apprehensive writers to distort and disguise the truth--perhaps even avoiding realization of the truth themselves--makes it more difficult to determine the causes of this apprehension.

As Robin Staudt has demonstrated in her "Ode to the reluctant writer," which has been quoted in part as an eqigram at the beginning of this paper, there seem to be an almost infinite number of reasons that can be given for not writing. Taken collectively and out of context these may seem humorous. Yet the crippling effect that writing apprehension can have on self-image and personal productivity is not at all funny.

What are the causes of this apprehension? The complexity and variability of human beings make it almost impossible to answer such a question in absolute terms. Any single response will be incomplete or inaccurate in some instance. In fact, Boice (1985) has cited forty separate ideas that have been advanced by researchers and therapists as explanations for this "blocking." Additional theories may be advanced in the future. Boice himself employs an inductive methodology to reveal seven cognitive components, the foremost of these--accounting for 41.67% of the evidenced blocking--is the awareness that writing is difficult and demanding work that exacts a personal price. This does not seem to be a particularly profound insight. Yet case studies such as the recent research of Petrosko, Kaiser, and Dietrich (1985) support Boice's view as to its importance. Anxious writers, in fact, have great difficulty in dealing with this realization. One suspects that Boice's second component, procrastination, may be rooted in his subjects' attitudes about the first. In any event there is considerable research to support his position on this as well (Dillon, Kent, and Malott, 1980; Harris and Sutton, 1983; and Boice, 1984). So there are significant trends within the research from which insights emerge.

Another apparent cause of writing apprehension is fear of exposure and of possible embarrassment--of being made to look or feel less than competent. This is certainly understandable. And it is less of a problem with other forms of communication. The spoken language--particularly informal, conversational communication--seems to offer abundant opportunities to express spontaneously whatever is appropriate to a situation. Even formal speech permits the use of a variety of gestures, modified tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact, together with all the dynamics of personal presence to help accomplish one's purposes. The speaker can also "read" his audience and from their reaction he can take cues to modify his presentation. Yet when the speaker turns to writing, many of the familiar means of focusing emphasis and utilizing it to best advantage seem to have diminished value, or their utility may be lost entirely (Wells, 1985). Writing seems to be nothing more than words moving on a line across a page revealing some of what a writer knows, but also revealing some of what is not known. It then must pass into

the hands of one who seems determined to review it critically, concentrating on every flaw. Teachers and reviewers may see the process of evaluation as constructive and beneficial but many writers react negatively to anything but the most favorable of responses--seeing the process of writing as a trap in which they are required to demonstrate their shortcomings (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Another contributory factor is perfectionism. Thomas Newkirk (1979) maintains that the pressures created by a perceived need to be perfect can have a paralyzing effect on writers. Research supporting the inhibiting effect of the desire to demonstrate mastery and uniqueness is both extensive and long-standing--dating back to the Nineteenth Century (Royce, 1898).

The debilitating influence of perfectionism seems to be compounded by the requirement to edit one's writing (Rainer, 1978). On the face of it editing would seem to be an advantage of writing over speaking for the spoken word can not be called back and modified and certainly all of us have had some occasion on which we have wished that it could. But unfortunately the process of editing takes place even while the writer is composing. This can have a negative effect on the anxious writer. It is as if the edictor were continually looking over the shoulder of the composer and making critical suggestions while the poor writer is simply trying to get ideas on paper as coherently as possible (Elbow, 1973). For the highly apprehensive this can result in extremely counterproductive behavior. In one documented case a student spent 98 hours reworking a 2-page paper, ultimately deciding to turn in the original version (Bloom, 1980). It is hard to imagine such an individual having positive feelings about the creative potential of a situation in which she is required to write.

Inadequate practice is still another problem. Evidence has shown that British students write almost three times as much as their American counterparts (Shaughnessy, 1977). And the prestigious Carnegie Foundation has indicated that writing deficiency is the most critical shortcoming of our schools (1983). Additional practice within a positive context would give apprehensive writers the opportunities to confront their fears and overcome their anxieties. Daily journal writing has been shown to be very effective in this regard (Woodman and Adler, 1985), as has peer interaction (Fox, 1980) particularly within the setting of a writing lab (Hurlow, 1983). At the very least students should be provided with sufficient opportunities to be able to discover that they can express themselves satisfactorily in writing.

It is also extremely important for teachers to commit themselves to the creation and maintenance of a positive academic environment. It is easy for evaluators to concentrate on what is wrong with student composition while all but taking for granted that which is right. Teachers need to dwell on positive aspects of virtually every student composition emphasizing progress and the possibilities of future successes instead of reinforcing expectations of failure (Vielhaber, 1983). It is also extremely important for students to be

aware from the outset of the standards by which they are to be evaluated and it is equally important for these criteria to be applied consistently and evenhandedly (Smith, 1984).

Students should prepare themselves to be successful by thinking through writing situations and developing outlines--either written or mental--for the development of their compositions (Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter, 1982). Having done so, and having engaged in appropriate prewriting exercises such as freewriting, nutshelling, and invisible writing, the student should be encouraged to write and to keep writing. Editing should be minimal during this process. Students who stop to edit and correct while worrying excessively about their finished products invest an enormous amount of themselves emotionally into what is being produced (Elbow, 1973). Research indicates that effective writers have developed the ability to plan and revise as they go along, whereas less effective writers are much less capable of employing self-monitoring feedback (Flower and Hayes, 1980; Somers, 1980). Students need to realize that they are not saving time by limiting themselves to a single draft that is covered with crossouts and scribbles. If anything, the opposite is the case: such a student will take too much time and expend too much energy. The excessively anxious writer needs to learn the value of writing first and revising composition later (Vielhaber, 1983). Rico and Claggett (1980) maintain that such an approach permits the writer to engage the right (i.e., the less mechanistic, more intuitive and visionary) hemisphere of the brain as a means of getting started and sustaining effort during the writing process.

There is reason to believe that business writing with its concentrated focus on specific situations, audiences, and purposes may have value in overcoming student writing apprehension. It was just this sort of methodology that Fox used in 1980 to reduce the writing apprehension of his students with no loss of student composition quality. Neal Raisman (1984) applied a similar technique to the teaching of technical writing with positive results. Yet it seems that neither Fox (1980) nor Raisman (1984) have used this methodology to its fullest potential.

In 1971, Janet Emig performed observational research on students who were then engaged in writing processes. In her classic study she found that twelfth graders utilize two clearly different approaches to writing. For most of their academic assignments they engaged in "extensive" writing--a process of contrivance designed to provide what they think their teachers expect while trying to subdue their feelings of cynicism and hostility. But in their often-voluntary, personal writing--as in notes and letters to friends--they engaged in "reflexive" writing--a process which generates more personal care and concern. The reflexive writing was characterized by a vitality that was almost always missing from the students' extensive writing.

Much of the writing that actually takes place in the business world is more reflexive than extensive. Businesmen do not write term papers and answers to essay questions. They

write letters, memos, and reports that are directed to a specific individual or group of individuals within a particular context to accomplish a particular purpose--to advise, persuade, demand, conciliate, etc. In this vein, Klemmer and Snyder (1972) have determined that white collar business personnel spend 19% --almost one-fifth--of their work time engaging in written communication. And, generally speaking, the more conversational those communications are the better (Wells, 1985). Lally, Boozer, and Stacks (1983) speculate that if students can be permitted to function in an academic setting as they would in real-life situations by employing an individualized approach then they may learn more than just the customs and conventions of business communications within their rhetorical dimensions. Such an approach could have an unfettering effect on student confidence and creativity, resulting in both a marked improvement in composition quality and a corresponding decrease in writing apprehension--changes that would be extremely gratifying for students and teachers alike.

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